
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

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PHONY YELLOW PAGES BILLINGS

When we think "Yellow Pages," we think of our local telephone directory and the yellow pages full of business listings indexed by the goods or services they provide. But our familiarity with the Yellow Pages is giving scam artists a chance to steal your business's money. Watch out for Yellow Page solicitations cloaked as invoices.

There are several companies that send statements for yellow page advertisements that look like legitimate bills or invoices. Words like "renewal notice" or "amount due" appear on the notices, and these phony bills may be for several hundred dollars. The return address often includes a suite number to give the impression that the firm has a permanent address. But if you look at the so-called "invoice" carefully, it usually does not indicate a phone number to reach the company.

The bogus invoices look real. Most display the widely known "let your fingers do the walking" logo. They also may contain warnings that you will be left out of the directory if you do not pay immediately.

Businesses that pay the bills think they are paying for ads in the local telephone directory. Instead, the solicitations are for independent, regional, yellow page directories, which are not connected to the major telephone companies. In addition, the directories often are placed in limited locations, such as hotels, service stations, and a few libraries, and do not reach the general public at large.

Of course, not all solicitations received in the mail look like bills, invoices or account statements. Businesses may receive a check that looks like a refund or rebate check. Read the front and the back of the check carefully. By cashing the check, you may be agreeing to be billed monthly for something you don't want or need, such as Internet access or membership in a Web directory. And more and more, bogus Yellow Pages invoices are being designed to look exactly like the monthly telephone service bill on which you normally receive your Yellow Pages charge.

Read yellow pages bills and solicitations carefully. Most solicitations give no clue as to how many directories will be published, when they will be completed, or where they will be distributed. Many of the phony bills are also carefully devised to stay within the limits of the law by including a statement such as, "This is not a bill and you are under no obligation to pay the amount stated," but this may be in small type and easily overlooked.

The phony yellow pages billings are targeted at businesses such as florists, attorneys, optometrists, and some other businesses regularly advertising in the Yellow Pages, but any business is susceptible to this scam.

Phony billing scams are quite prevalent as scam artists try to take advantage of the tremendous volume of paperwork some businesses process. Be sure to read your mail carefully. Don't confuse a fake billing with a statement for your business's regular yellow page listings. When in doubt, contact the company that carries your regular yellow pages listing. Verify that your company mailed the renewal invoice and clarify procedures for payment.

If you have questions or concerns, contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division at 1-800-472-2600 or 1-701-328-3404 or the U.S. Postal Inspector at 1-800-372-8347.

Next week we will discuss Internet "yellow page" invoices that businesses are receiving via fax.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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